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AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE PASS TO AMEMBASSY MALABO

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SUBJECT: YAR'ADUA'S HOLD ON POWER GROWS TENUOUS

CLASSIFIED BY: James P. McAnulty, Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy
Abuja, Political Section; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Yar'Adua's recent BBC interview showed that he is alive, but reinforced doubts about his ability to resume presidential powers. The Federal Executive Council (FEC) has become divided over whether Yar'Adua should hand over power to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan. Many Senators have grown concerned over Yar'Adua's health and summoned Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) Mahmud Yayale Ahmed to the National Assembly January 21 to brief them behind closed doors. The SGF reportedly revealed nothing new at this briefing. A presidential advisor commented that Yar'Adua's brief interview, while genuine, showed that Yar'Adua remained weak. The delay by Yar'Adua's inner circle to hand over power officially to his Vice President may have tilted the balance of power towards the latter. Former heads of state Ibrahim Babangida and Olusegun Obasanjo will likely wield considerable behind-the-scenes influence as political jockeying continues in the PDP. END SUMMARY.

YAR'ADUA SPEAKS

¶2. (SBU) The Nigerian media provided extensive coverage of President Yar'Adua's British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio interview, recorded January 11 and broadcast the following day. In the interview, which lasted 86 seconds, Yar'Adua weakly proclaimed "At the moment, I am undergoing treatment, and I'm getting better from the treatment. I hope that very soon there will be tremendous progress, which will allow me to get back home." He said he had remained in constant contact with the Vice President and later wished the Nigerian Super Eagles national football team success in the African Cup of Nations tournament in Angola.

13. (C) Jonathan Mark, Special Assistant to (and son of) Senate President David Mark confided to PolCouns on January 20 that many Senators had grown concerned over the President's health and prolonged absence. He said his father told him that he shut off debate in the Senate over the President's health, strictly because he considered the Senate's powers over the situation to be circumscribed under the Constitution. Instead, the Senators summoned SGF Yayale to appear January 21 before the Senate. While he testified behind closed doors, several Senators reportedly later told the media that Ayale did not add any value to what they already knew.

14. (C) Separately, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairperson Jibril Aminu told PolCouns that Yar'Adua's radio interview did little to dispel concerns, noting that a videotaped interview would have been more effective had the President been in position to grant one. He conjectured that Yar'Adua's poor physical appearance must have precluded such an option. Nonetheless, he expressed hope that Yar'Adua's illness would permit eventual recovery. He discounted the need for a formal hand-over of powers, insisting that Vice President Jonathan had already begun to exercise presidential powers in all but name. He cited the Vice President's

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ordering of the deployment of troops to Jos to quell violence as an example of his willingness to exercise powers normally reserved to the Commander in Chief.

CABINET MINISTERS SHARPLY DIVIDED

15. (C) Jonathan Mark revealed that the Federal Executive Council (Nigeria's expanded Cabinet) had grown sharply divided over whether Yar'Adua should hand over power to Vice President Jonathan. He listed Minister of Agriculture Abba Sayyadi Ruma, a prominent Yar'Adua loyalist, as favoring the status quo, while the SGF leads the group advocating immediate hand over. Mark predicted that the "status quo" could not continue beyond mid-February. By then, he said, either one side or the other must "give in."

DOUBTS PERSIST

16. (C) Presidential Advisor Sani Musa told PolCouns January 15 that persistent rumors of Yar'Adua's death (including that he had died as long ago as December 10) and the march that unfolded in Abuja on January 13 to protest the President's prolonged absence had forced the Yar'Adua inner circle to arrange the radio interview. Despite doubts expressed by some Nigerians about the interview's authenticity, Musa said he was convinced that the voice belonged to Yar'Adua. Musa, who had just returned from a visit to former President Ibrahim Babangida in Minna to extend condolences over the death of former First Lady Maryam Babangida, said that Babangida also told him that he considered the voice to be authentic.

¶7. (C) Musa stated his conviction that Yar'Adua had only a short time to live and could not resume his presidential duties even if he returned alive to Nigeria. He disclosed the delivery of expensive medical equipment recently to the Presidential Villa along with plans to arrange for medical personnel from Saudi Arabia to travel to Abuja to oversee continued treatment. He had heard that Yar'Adua was scheduled to return January 10 to Abuja, but this event did materialize because the inner circle first wanted Saudi-based doctors to verify the adequacy of arrangements for Yar'Adua's follow-on treatment at the Villa.

FORMER HEADS OF STATE KEY TO SUCCESSION

¶8. (C) Musa remarked that failure by Yar'Adua and his inner circle to hand over power to Vice President Jonathan as Acting President not only showed their distrust of the Vice President to handle presidential powers but their lack of willingness to abide by Constitutional provisions. Such delay in handing over power in an orderly way, he asserted, has caused the balance of power to switch from the President's inner circle to the Vice President. Had they acted earlier, he said, the President's closest advisors could have extracted concessions over who would remain in the Cabinet and who would become the new Vice President. Now that a hand-over to Jonathan appeared all but inevitable, the incumbent Vice President enjoyed the upper hand on such issues. He predicted that Jonathan would consult widely and pay especially close attention to advice received from two former heads of state, Babangida and Obasanjo.

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¶9. (SBU) According to local press reports, Obasanjo attempted unsuccessfully to convince a January 14-15 meeting of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) Board of Trustees (BOT) that Jonathan should become Acting President immediately. Obasanjo reportedly attracted only the support of two BOT members.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) President Yar'Adua's radio interview did little to dispel concerns over his failing health. If anything, his weakened voice reinforced the perception that he will not return any time soon to exercise presidential powers. Political jockeying continues, with Vice President Jonathan exercising more "de facto" responsibilities. The FEC, Senate, and ruling PDP have tried to portray satisfaction over the "status quo," but many recognize that Yar'Adua's hold on power has grown increasingly untenable. Obasanjo reportedly lost the latest battle within his party, but he and IBB will almost certainly wield considerable clout over who becomes the new Vice President if Goodluck Jonathan officially assumes presidential power. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Embassy coordinated this telegram with ConGen Lagos.
SANDERS